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ABSTRACT

In addition to enabling students to discover ideas and providing them with raw materials that they can shape into polished drafts, free writing can give students experience, thus making them more comfortable with writing. Beginning each class with free writing activities on topics of enough interest that they distract reluctant writers from self-consciousness can be a very successful activity. Formats such as self-analysis, role playing, description, or argumentation may vary, but the instructions for free writing are basically the same: write rapidly, whatever comes to mind, without worrying about spelling, mechanics, or awkwardness. Feel free to experiment, there is no right or wrong; free writing will never be corrected or graded. Free writing is a process, not a finished product. One reason why some students write poorly is that much of their previous instruction emphasized correct surface features rather than the steps real writers follow toward their finished product. Volunteers reading their writing aloud and students responding to each other's writing are among alternatives to grading. Free writing can create conditions like those in which children acquire language: through trial and error they succeed in constructing an expanded and more competent grammar, and their joy in the process is both an end in itself and a means to further achievement. (HTH)

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CREATING CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING: A FURTHER ARGUMENT FOR FREE WRITING

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Our session title is "Getting Students Started." I want to talk about free writing, which is a superb invention heuristic, but I don't want to limit discussion to just that benefit. Free writing can get students started in several senses. It can start them in writing a paper, enabling them to discover ideas and providing them with the raw (and not-so-raw) materials they can shape into polished drafts.

But it can also get students started in a larger sense--started as writers. Many of our students are inexperienced writers, quite intimidated by their conception of the formal writing tasks which college expects of them. The blank page holds terrors--or at least mysteries--for them. Free writing in the classroom can give them experience--a lot of it and a variety of it--and in doing so can make writing more comfortable for them and help them overcome writer's block.

Still a third way free writing can get students started is each day in class. Free writing is an excellent warm-up activity. Because a good free writing assignment can be fun to do and lead to lively discussion, it can help create the kind of conditions in which learning thrives.

But so far I have been speaking generally and several rungs up the abstraction ladder. Although the details may be familiar to many of you, I want to be specific about what free writing is and does. The specifics come from what I know best: my own experience.

I first had my students free-write (although I didn't call it that at the time) four years ago after reading a "Staffroom Interchange" piece in CCC by Gary Jones (May, 1977). The article was called "The Five-Minute Writing," which describes the brief assignment Jones gave his students at the beginning of each class. He in turn had adapted an idea offered in 1967 by Bonnie Rubenstein,

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which she called a "10-Minute Writing " ("Say Something in English," Junior College Journal, October, 1967).

Rubenstein and Jones made the sensible suggestion that brief in-class writing exercises could motivate apprentice writers, increase their fluency and give them practice in a variety of rhetorical situations. In their classrooms, students took turns suggesting the topic for the day's writing. The same students also took the papers home, wrote a brief non-judgmental response on each one, and passed them on to the teacher, who read and returned them. The papers were never graded or even corrected. Rubenstein and Jones reported that their students liked the exercises, felt better about writing in general and improved as writers.

I first began using free writing in a similar way--as a class warm-up--and although I now use it for many ends, such as pre-writing to generate ideas and drafts for my assignments, I still begin each class with free writing. These exercises are sometimes related and sometimes unrelated to the activities I have planned for the rest of the period (although free writings have a way of generating discussions and activities I hadn't foreseen).

My students keep a notebook for free writing and journal entries, and at the beginning of each class I have them write for several minutes on a specific topic. I solicit ideas from students, but most of the topics are mine, since I've found I can usually invent better topics than they do. I hope to make the topics varied, interesting and provocative--likely to set their thoughts (and thus their pens) in motion. The best topics are of enough interest that they distract reluctant writers from self-consciousness--from the awareness that what they are doing is writing--as they rush to put down their thoughts on paper.

Sometimes my topics are personal and call for narration or self-analysis--forms apprentice writers like and can respond well to. A typical exercise might look like this:

> In writing about herself, one college freshman wrote, "I'm a typical Judy-person. I'm talkative, cheerful, and I make friends easily." Maybe you have a different idea of what a "typical Judy-person" is, but it is clear that our names are more to us than just labels for identification.
>
> Write for five minutes about your name. Do you like it? Does it fit you? Would you change it if you could? To what? Do people misspell or mispronounce it? Do they expect you to be a certain kind of person when they hear your name?
>
> Write about one or more of these questions (or anything else the topic of your name brings to mind). Write about your first, last, middle or nickname (or all of them if you want).

At other times I may have them role-play and experiment with other forms like description or argumentation. In the Belgian Telegraphist exercise, I use a brief narrative to build a frame that might motivate and encourage their interest in an exercise in technical description:

> You are a telegraph operator in the small Belgian village of Poirot during the latter days of World War II. It is a gloomy, fog-shrouded night, and you are working late, sending routine messages. The door to your office suddenly opens, and you turn around to see an ashen-faced man stagger in. He is clutching his side, where a large bloodstain darkens his trench coat. He falls to his knees by your desk and, signalling you to be quiet, gasps this message:

"I am dying, my friend, so listen well. I am LaFarge, an agent of Allied Intelligence. I have a message which must get through to London or else the war is lost. The Nazi have developed a powerful instrument of destruction against which there is only one defense, and I have stolen the plans to the counter-weapon. I was able to transmit all but the final configuration to England before the Gestapo reached me, and I escaped with this wound. The enemy will soon trace me to this place, and my end is coming quickly. You must transmit this plan immediately. The fate of the Free World depends on you."

With that he thrusts a document toward you and collapses on the floor. He is dead. You look at the document, which shows this figure:

You can transmit only words, not a picture, so you will have to use language to describe the figure in such a way that the receiver can reconstruct it. Write the clear description of the configuration that will allow the Free World to survive.

The format may differ from teacher to teacher--probably everyone who has tried the procedure has discovered new possibilities for free writing--but a certain core of rules (or non-rules) characterizes free writing. The directions, put simply, go something like this: "Write on the subject we've been talking about for the next several minutes. Write whatever thoughts come to mind. Write rapidly and don't stop to think; do your thinking on paper, as you write. Don't stop, either, to worry about spelling or mechanics; errors can always be corrected later. For now, don't let yourself be distracted from your ideas about the subject. Don't worry if you write something that sounds silly or awkward, or if you change your mind.

Put down your new ideas and keep going. If you wander off the subject, that's okay too. Have fun with your free writing. Feel free to experiment. Since you are exploring ideas and writing as you think, there is no right or wrong in free writing. Your free writing will never be corrected or graded."

There is no reason for free writing not to be this free. A free writing is not intended as a finished product, but rather as writing-in-process or an ephemera written for the moment and perhaps just for oneself. The formal conventions and restrictions which characterize public prose are important elsewhere--but not here. It is essential to stress that this freedom involves neither the teaching of bad habits nor the abdication of standards--two objections sometimes raised--but rather teaches some very good habits and useful distinctions. If anything, students have to be taught not to be concerned with correctness at all times.

One reason why some students write badly is that they have been led to assume false models of how writing is produced. Much of their previous instruction may have been characterized by an emphasis on correct surface features above all else and by the analysis of finished products rather than by learning and practicing the steps real writers follow as they reach that stage. As a result, these students are likely to believe good writers produce finished drafts all at once. They are likely to be intimidated by this false model of writing which they can never emulate. And they are likely to be paralyzed by their attempts to attain instant perfection. Writers who are not skilled at discovering and organizing ideas have difficulty doing every step at once. To stop when you are struggling with concepts to worry about whether "accommodate" has one m or two is to disrupt a critical thought process. The very important business of achieving correctness can come later--during the revising and editing stages. Students need to be taught this distinction.

The goal of freeing students from distractions in the inventive stages of writing requires that they be freed from penalties as well. To grade free writing or even to correct it is to defeat its purpose. It is difficult to read a student's notebook or journal and not mark some obvious error, but at times we need to stifle our editors' instincts--especially when we are dealing with hesitant writers for whom a filled page is in itself a victory. When we read a student's free writing, our response should be to what the writer says (rather than to how he or she says it).

Free writing can give students the practice they need in producing a large and varied body of writing, without adding appreciably to our own paper load. Many kinds of responses to free writing exercises are possible. Students can read and respond to each other's writing. Volunteers can read their writing aloud. The teacher can collect notebooks on occasion and respond selectively to particular exercises. This needn't be a great burden, and having us as readers is important to students. Although free writing and journal entries can sometimes be very personal, students do want an audience, and they write better when they know they will be read by a responsive and sympathetic reader.

I've said that one benefit of free writing for students is in helping to overcome writer's block--giving them the experience and familiarity with the act of writing which will allow them to gain ease and fluency. Another is to help them grow--to write with variety and skill. Writing teachers have much to learn from the study of child language acquisition. We become writers much the way as children we became speakers--through constant practice and experimentation. Unfortunately the conditions established for learning the two tasks often differ widely. For children, language learning is a game with constant rewards. They delight in the play of language. They constantly try

to expand their repertoires, and in so doing, they make frequent errors. They overgeneralize; they misuse words and they invent faulty syntactic rules. But these errors are a natural and even necessary part of their development. Through trial and error they succeed in constructing an expanded and more competent grammar, and their joy in the process is both an end in itself and a means to further achievement.

The conditions under which we learn to write, however, are often made quite different. An emphasis on instant correctness, with penalties for error even in the initial stages of composing, surely discourages experiment and hinders growth. Young writers become self-conscious and conservative, playing it safe with what they already know, not likely to take the risks involved in breaking new ground. Free writing can create conditions like those in which we acquired language as children. It can be a way of making writing as natural an activity as speaking and restore some of the joy and playfulness to the task.

When I give a free writing exercise, I try to remove some of the formality and artificiality from the activity and to make it as immediate and well motivated as I can. Often I start by talking for a few minutes about a topic that interests me and then asking the students to write their ideas about it. The introduction stimulates their thinking and makes the topic of real concern to them and not just a classroom exercise. Sometimes lively ideas are already in the air. Sex education in the public schools is a fiery controversy in Wilmington this year, and when I asked my students to write how they felt about it, the words poured forth. Several students wanted to read their statements aloud, and the discussion which followed was spirited.

At this point the class was interacting well and responsive, and the atmosphere was the kind teachers love because it lends itself so easily to learning. Often the class moves on to other business after free writing but not always. My students wrote about guns after John Lennon was shot, but we were not well informed about the handgun issue. Our discussion led us naturally to research, and the class compiled an annotated bibliography, and they later wrote short argumentative research papers on the topic. Free writings along the way clarified ideas and prompted more discussion.

The form of free writing need not always be self-analysis or personal opinion. A case approach, in which imaginary situations are established, can create interest and lead to practice in a wide variety of writing modes, styles, audiences and aims. While we were working on the gun-control papers I gave my classes a fictional situation like the following:

> Your Uncle Prescott, the big politician, has pulled strings to get you a summer job as a Student Research Intern for Senator Barney Blankenship. In the past you have disagreed with the Senator's position on nearly every issue, but the job is an invaluable opportunity for you, and you hope to learn a great deal from it about government and politics.
>
> Today you are working on the Senator's monthly newsletter to his constituents, and he asks you to write several brief policy statements, explaining his position on bills currently before the senate. These include laws to enact stricter handgun control, to ban smoking in public places, and to provide tuition subsidies to college students.
>
> Unfortunately, as usual, you disagree with the Senator's position on every one of these issues. But, given your job, you have no choice. It won't be easy, but you will have to make the

best case you can for his views.

Take one of these three issues and argue the side opposite to the one you yourself believe in. Use the arguments the Senator might give and be as convincing as you can be in support of the wrong side. Begin with the phrase, "I strongly support/oppose (pick one) the bill to _____ because..."

The students were to imagine themselves working for a Senator whose stand on guns was the reverse of their own. They had to ghost-write a brief statement of the senator's position to appear under his signature in his monthly newsletter to constituents. Arguing forcefully for a case they oppose required them to consider its merits and to practice rhetorical skills, and also prepared them to make their research paper presentations of the topic more balanced. Since experiment is always allowed and encouraged in free writing, a few students took their responses in different directions, such as creating parodies of political rhetoric.

Like the act of writing itself, our courses need to achieve a balance between discipline and freedom. We need to teach students the discipline of meeting deadlines, following conventions and formats, organizing logically, adapting to the needs of our readers, and simply accepting the hard work which writing entails. On the other hand, freedom is also important. Writers need imagination and insight and a willingness to experiment and to take chances. Free writing can be a valuable means to allow our student writers to develop these latter skills, which are essential to their growth as writers.